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Erlewine Book Sheds Light on Modern Jewish Philosophy

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— A new book by Chair and Associate Professor of [Religion](#) Robert Erlewine serves as an important contribution to the study of modern Jewish thought.

In [Judaism and the West](#) (University of Indiana Press, 2016), Erlewine examines the work of five Jewish philosophers in tracing various iterations of Judaism over a 50-year period. The philosophers under study – Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Joseph Soloveitchik – are among the most commonly taught thinkers in Jewish Studies, Erlewine said.

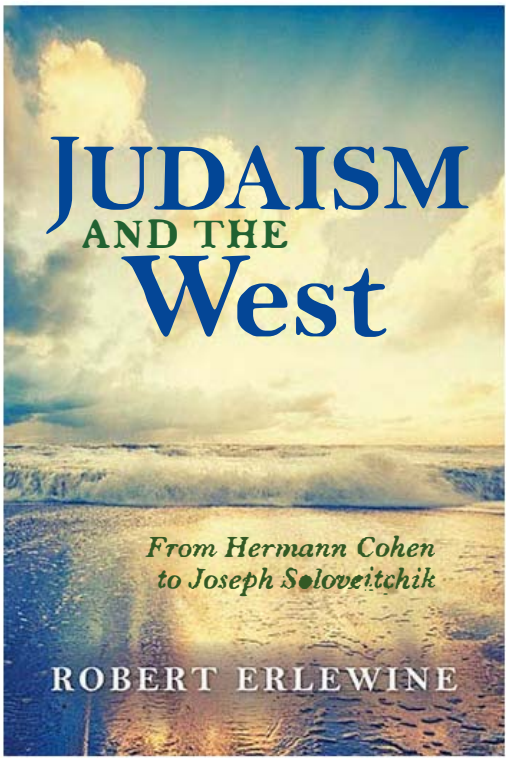
A philosopher of religion for more than 15 years, Erlewine said his recent scholarship has led him to increasingly situate modern Jewish philosophy in the larger framework of religious studies theory. By closely examining the work of several intellectual historians and theorists, Erlewine said he has come to regard modern Jewish philosophy as embedded in a network of discourses about race, religion and modernity.

Erlewine said Cohen’s work utilizes strategies that the other philosophers will later employ in some form or another. “He offers a theory of the West in which Judaism is of central significance, precisely at a moment when non-Jewish culture makers and theologians were trying to characterize Judaism as alien to it,” Erlewine said of Cohen (1842-1918). Secondly, Cohen employed methods of the study of religion that were taking place in academic institutions that excluded Jews. Cohen did so, Erlewine said, in order to criticize the institutional study of religion for its shortcomings and to offer alternative ways of study that allowed Cohen to put Judaism on a level playing field, or at times to give it an advantage.

In the time period of Cohen, Buber and the other philosophers upon which the book is based, their works demonstrated “a ferocity and bellicosity toward Christianity that is all too often concealed or minimized by the contemporary philosophers who study them,” Erlewine writes in his new book. “Rather than the clichés of futile, apologetic pleading for acceptance – or, in a more charitable assessment, the attempt to maintain dignity in the face of contempt – what we actually find in these works are active attempts to position Judaism as the beating heart of Western civilization at the expense of Christianity.”



Robert Erlewine



Erlewine emphasizes the political, philosophical and theological framework in which their respective works emerge (primarily the 1910s through the 1940s) are not the same from which the Jewish philosophers of today approach their questions. “The questions that lie before us today have to do with pluralism, fragmentation, and the many challenges – moral and political – associated with state power,” Erlewine writes. The chief impetus for his subjects’ thinking lay in contesting Christianity’s assumed religious dominance.

In the 19th century, there was a profound shift in how Europeans thought about the nature of religion, according to Erlewine. “Central to these changing sensibilities was the emerging field of philology, which offered dramatic new possibilities for reconceiving and reconstructing the ancestry and origins of peoples and nations,” Erlewine writes. “These changes in the way that language, identity, history and religion were understood brought increasing pressure on Christianity to shed its Semitic foundations.” Christianity’s relationship to the Old Testament, Greece and Middle East generated heated disputes, he said. “Unraveling the Greco-Hebraic foundations of Europe cast Jews as foreigners in Europe even though they had lived there for

millennia. It undermined the basic categories by which European Christians and Jews had previously understood themselves as bound together,” he writes.

Erlewine said he hopes the book attempts to integrate genealogical discussions about the study of religion into the study of modern Jewish philosophy. “I hope the book helps bring the study of modern Jewish philosophy out of its largely self-imposed isolation and emphasizes instead the ways that modern Jewish philosophy is bound up with larger European intellectual currents.”

Erlewine is also the author of *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason* (Indiana University Press, 2009). He joined the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 2006 after earning a Ph.D. in religious studies from Rice University. He is the author of several journal articles on figures in modern Jewish thought. He also served as managing editor of the *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* from 2011 to 2015.

